

## Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) Alternative State of the Union: Transportation Progressive Caucus

Monday, 28 January 2002

I am here to report that the State of the Union, in regard to federal transportation policy, is much weaker than it ought to be. As the Representative serving lower Manhattan, I spent most of September 11th trying to get home to my district. Amtrak was the only reliable mode of transportation into New York City as the airlines were grounded and car traffic onto the island was blocked. But the events of September 11th only highlighted what we already know: that rail service is an absolutely essential component of our national transportation system, and must be preserved. Congress must put more resources into our national rail system, both as a matter of sound environmental policy and as a matter of national security.

In 1997, Congress passed the Amtrak Reform and Accountability Act requiring Amtrak to be free of operating subsidies by the end of 2002, and created the Amtrak Reform Council to oversee the process. The Council just issued a report that says Amtrak cannot balance its operating budget by the end of 2002 and, therefore, should be broken up and privatized. Such an action would be disastrous for our country and unwise public policy. The Amtrak reform legislation, and this report, is based upon a false and unfair assumption. No transportation system can survive without subsidies. Amtrak cannot be expected to operate a national rail system and be economically self-sufficient, and we should not sacrifice one goal to achieve the other. Congress must restore its commitment to a national inter-city passenger rail system by repealing the unfair mandate of the 1997 reform law, and by investing in our rail infrastructure now.

We must eliminate the notion that rail subsidies are somehow a burden on government resources. This year, the total federal budget for the Department of Transportation was over \$59 billion. Of that amount, only \$521 million went to Amtrak. That's less than one quarter of one percent! The Federal Highway Administration received over \$32 billion, more than half of the entire DOT budget. To argue that Amtrak, or any rail system, is undeserving of federal investment is, quite simply, ridiculous.

By focusing transportation funding in highways and airports, the Federal Government is encouraging the expansion of transportation systems that pollute the environment, wear down our infrastructure and require greater public investment in the long-term. One truck does as much damage as ten thousand cars, yet Congress continues to funnel money to our highway system without taking any substantive measures to divert that traffic to rail.

Congress must encourage the development of more environmentally friendly alternatives, and it should begin by investing in high-speed rail. Thirteen of the fifteen most congested metropolitan areas are located on, or close to, proposed high-speed rail lines, as are eighteen of the twenty most congested airports. Many of our airports, particularly those in congested urban areas, are at capacity and cannot be expanded. High-speed rail can be a part of the solution. For air routes less than 500 miles in length, high-speed rail can provide competitive trip times and fares, freeing up space in our airports.

Areas of this country without rail service suffer higher levels of traffic congestion and air pollution. High-speed rail should be an alternative available to all communities, particularly those along short-haul flight routes. We must expand rail service to all parts of this country so that no city, county or township should have to suffer the consequences of a Federal Government that fails to provide a comprehensive and environmentally friendly national transportation system.

Events of the past few months have also shown just how essential a healthy rail transportation system is for our national security. We must provide viable alternatives should one mode of transportation suddenly become unavailable, or for that matter, less desirable. Redundancy is the key to any national defense system. You must have multiple critical infrastructure assets to reduce the vulnerability of any one target and to ensure that our cities continue to function should an attack occur.

The current state of the union, in regard to federal transportation policy, is one of skewed priorities and double standards. The Federal Government invests in highways and runways, so why not Amtrak? Did Congress ask the airlines to show a profit in exchange for the \$15 billion aid package passed last September? No. In fact, the industry stood to lose over \$2 billion last year before the events of September 11th. Congress handed over the funds, anyway, without requiring any changes in the industry, under the guise that the airlines provide an essential service that must be preserved. Why should Amtrak be held to a different standard? Congress must reverse this unfair policy by protecting Amtrak, and investing in high-speed, inter-city passenger rail to create a transportation system that is better for the environment, our economy and our national security.

###